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THE MARRIAGE LAW.

A Letter to Wives.

THE Deceased Wife's Sister Bill has been again rejected by the House of Lords. There are many of us who will not easily forget what we felt on hearing this news. We had so completely made up our minds that the Bill must pass, and our cause be lost, that we waited for the report of the third reading in that special mood of anticipation which holds us when we wait for the news of a death long since expected, and now inevitably close at hand. Perhaps there were some in high place who knew a probability still to exist of a sufficient shifting in the weights to allow the balance once more to dip in our favour; but we all over the country did not know it. Our surprise was great; our thankfulness a thousandfold greater. We said one to another, "Is not this good?"

Now again there comes the pause, now again the time which must elapse before the promoters of the Bill can once more press it

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forward. Year after year they have persevered, year after year they have almost succeeded; but year after year they have not succeeded quite. Surely the significance of their failure is great. Consider, they have on their side all the advantage given by the momentum of a compact body which attacks, and the attack of which it appears is sustained by strong personal reasons on the part of its individual members, and which knows that it has no honourable retreat if defeated. For if it be driven back in its attempt to force upon the country a lower standard of marriage (lower because involving disunion and separate interests between man and wife) than that which has hitherto been upheld among us; if, which pray God may be the case, its persistent action shall only result in rousing the manhood and womanhood of England to proclaim and hold fast, in the light of full understanding, that which may possibly have been hitherto maintained among the people rather as a kind of tradition not fully comprehended because never questioned, the dignity, the nobility, the sanctity of marriage,—it must remain for ever branded with the mark of that most ignominious failure—failure in an evil cause. On our side we have up to the present time laboured under the disadvantage of much seeming indifferentism springing from the inertia of those who do not realize the import-

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ance of the struggle which is going on. The attack has been steady, continuous, determined: must we not own that the defence has been, on the whole, partial, lukewarm, careless? The attitude has been as of one who says, "This is certainly a thing you ought not to take; but I do not know that it is of much consequence to me whether you get it or not." And besides this, there has been doubtless felt on the part of those who have worked hard against the Bill something of the sensations so well described the other night by the Duke of Argyle. He spoke of the lassitude, the weariness he was tempted to feel, the natural desire to turn away from a subject the contemplation of which brought with it so much painful and saddening thought. His words were very true; and if a man feels this, does not a woman feel it more?

Yet, in spite of all our drawbacks, year after year the Bill has not become law. Our course against it has been as the perilous passage across an ice-slope, as an all but impossible rock-climb, as the course of a despaired-of illness; footstep after footstep is made sure, point after point is reached, day after day is passed, and still the climber is safe on the track, still the patient has not relaxed his grasp on life; and at each point, each crisis, there is maybe a breathing space, a time to collect the mind, and summon the powers for the next effort. This is

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now the case with us, and this is why, after the long-drawn breath of relief at the immediate danger past, not a moment must be lost in consolidating forces, in maturing strategy, in laying out plans for the most thorough, united, and efficacious action against the Bill. Every one in his place—judge, lawyer, member of Parliament, bishops, clergy, laity—every one wielding the weapon best fitted to his hand.

But with the duties of these men I am not now concerned. I write a woman to women; I write to you, wives of England, and I say that we who call ourselves by that honoured name—and there never has been and is not now in all the world a name for woman more honourable and honoured than that of an English wife—I say that we have a great duty to perform in this matter. It is the duty of understanding the proposed change in the marriage law, the motive of it, the meaning of it, the bearings of it, the indubitable results which will follow it. It is natural enough that hitherto numbers and numbers of women should have thought little about the matter; what cause had they to meditate on the marriage laws at all? Till now, an English girl, in happy innocence and ignorance of wickedness—or ignorance of the world, if you prefer that phrase—has stepped into the position of wife, and filled it in the same undisturbed security of mind with which she

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dwelt among her own people, and in her father's house. If there were breakers of unhallowed desires outside the haven of her home, what was that to her? and why should she take alarm amidst the loves and duties of her tranquil life, and be like one planting sentinels where no foe can ever come? So safe, so peaceful have we been, living with our husbands, with no thought of "yours" or "mine" between us, but only that thrice-happy, thrice-blessed "ours"—"ours" of the brothers and sisters, as well as of the children, of the house, the gold, and the gear—that we have lost all consciousness of what danger is; we do not know it when we see it, we have no idea at all how any small alteration Parliament may choose to make in the marriage laws can affect us, or our well-being. Our home is so big in our own eyes, all that passes in the outer world is so much like a series of pictures—beautiful, interesting, or moving, but only pictures still—seen around us, that we have failed to discern the connection between these public measures and our own private weal. We have been like babies in a sea-boat, who would be mightily amused at seeing the corks pulled out and thrown aside, and the pretty little bubbles of water come dancing in. I declare that I believe there are numbers of women in England who have just as little conception as this of the meaning and pur-

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port of the Deceased Wife's Sister Bill. But this ignorance, in its origin and source both right and happy, is now become dangerous and foolish. The day when it might be allowed is gone for ever, inevitably gone. It is now the duty of every wife to study and comprehend the reason, the strength, the foundation of that position in which she has hitherto so securely dwelt, lest it be undermined ere she be aware. On the heads of those men who are assailing marriage be the responsibility and the blame of forcing women to study matters on which heretofore they need never think, but which they must face now, face boldly in the sacred name of purity, even as angels meet ministers of evil.

No question can well be more general than this is. It is not a question of political party, not a question of class, not a question of Church and Dissent, not even distinctively a religious question, as we commonly use the term; for it is a question of those relations between man and woman, the regulation of which not merely exalts or debases, but actually creates or destroys the social well-being of a nation; and these relations being universal, so strong concerning them is the teaching only of nature and of social philosophy that the subject may not unfairly be considered without special reference to its religious side. Approach it from what side you will, take it in what light you will, the subject

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of the marriage laws of a nation will remain, not only to every man who has the instincts of statesmanship, but to every man of capacity for steady thought and serious reflection, one of the most vital importance. And it is an ill augury of the spirit of the time, when in such an assembly as our House of Lords, a man is found to get up and speak on such a subject in a tone which might perhaps have befitted, on a suitable matter, those who address us through the pages of a comic periodical. Whatever else may be thought or imagined, this at least is certain; a question which involves the primary morality of a nation cannot be regarded but as a matter for the most serious reflection, and the most honest and searching exercise of judgment. And surely where judgment has not been perverted by inclination,

> "Inclination snatching arguments
> To make indulgence seem judicious choice,"

—there will be found to be but one conclusion which can be reached by thinkers who uphold the dignity and the high place of man in creation, who maintain that he nourishes within him a real life of the spirit other than the life with which he comes and goes upon the earth like the beasts that perish, and who will not allow that the passions which he shares with those beasts shall be exalted into a governing power

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of his life, but demand that they be reined in and ruled by reason, clothed with honour, and sanctified by the dominion of the spirit, "the holy spirit of man." If this question is not distinctively religious, neither is it distinctively a woman's question, though doubtless, on the first view, the woman's concern in it comes most naturally into sight. It is far too deep for that. If a woman needs a distinctive question, let her milliner supply it her; she cannot have it on such matters as morality and marriage. Useless and unprofitable and vain is the popular manner of talk which sets man against woman and woman against man, debates as to the mind of one and the intellect of the other, and gravely argues (hear, O ye shades of logicians!) that where difference is, there must inferiority be. Were such talk to go on while the world stood—to the vast encouragement of the cotton wool manufacture—it could do no more than splutter against the rock of the fact which has been since mankind was, and will be till mankind ceases to be—the fact that man cannot be without woman, nor woman without man; that either half must ever be needed to make up the perfect whole, and that the appointed place of neither can be broken away from without the consequence of pain and injury to their common life. Work the sum as you will, you can but bring out this one answer; nor

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can it be better stated than in the words of the Christian Apostle, "Neither is the man without the woman, nor the woman without the man, in the Lord." Whether you take the words in their fullest Christian meaning, or use them only in the vague way in which such words are now too often used, because men, while seeking to evade the obligations of religious belief, are yet compelled, by the force of their own reason, to speak in terms which acknowledge a Supreme Good, an overwhelming Power, a something or somewhat beyond themselves in which they live —in whatever way you take the words, they proclaim, in an all-comprehensive summary, the relation of man and woman for all time. Linked together by the inextricably intertwined chain of necessity and love, and dependent on each other, as for physical, so for the full development of moral, intellectual, and spiritual life, they move together through the course of the world under one common destiny, with one common interest, to one common goal.

And now, in taking up the question of the relation of man and woman in marriage, there is of course a great deal to be said which I, speaking to you, may pass over very lightly or not touch upon at all. For I write as a woman to women, as a wife to wives, and surely with the understood prefix of Christian in either character.

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We have the facts that man is, and that woman is, and that man takes woman in order that children may be born, and so the world may go on. Thus far is indisputable; but the very next proposition brings me into the region of challenge, though the argument for it, from the very nature and constitution of man, is almost irresistible. Man takes one woman, and takes her for all the days of his life. If this is granted to be the most desirable social arrangement—and I think (do not you think, women and wives of England?) that the people of England do so consider it,—then at once comes the question, What manner of tie is this that is formed between the man and the woman? Is it, can it be, a mere contract, a business partnership, an obligation to perform certain duties at certain times, and otherwise to lead an independent existence, like two clerks in an office, who go their separate ways when business hours are over? Of course law-makers can if they choose regard, or affect to regard, the marriage tie in this light; can make it legal to treat it accordingly; can inflict the most cruel wounds on that mysterious relation which they thus leave unrecognized; can lower the standard and lessen the performance of mutual duty, and darken the lustre of mutual devotion. But though they may disturb and mar, can they either create or destroy the real nature of that

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tie, the constitution of which lies deep within the heart and conscience of man, and therefore within the purpose of God? We have surely but to appeal to our own hearts, and our most deeply felt experience, and to the facts we see all day long, and year after year in the world around us, to learn what is the nature, what the power of marriage; to discover whether it be possible that such a relation between man and woman—between two creatures of head, and heart, and thought, and affection, and living mind, neither brutes nor machines—can in the nature of things be maintained as a mere civil contract. Not more certain is the chemical action of one substance upon another, than is the action upon each other of two human minds, brought constantly together in the closest of all human relationships; not more impossible would it be to the chemist to combine the two substances and then prevent their mutual action, than it would be to bring man and woman together as husband and wife, and then attempt to hinder the assimilation and interfusion of character which must inevitably take place. As in every instance, so here most notably the action of nature aspires and reaches towards the gifts of grace; and the pure, loyal, and affectionate man and woman faithfully living together, do naturally tend to become, what the dictum of Christianity pronounces them to be,

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no more twain, but one flesh. The union is as veritable as the mystery is excellent; and the language which recognizes it as such is the common phraseology of the people.

But you to whom I write will say there is no need to dwell on this point to you; as well might I set to work carefully to prove to you the claims of the baby, whose little heart-beats seem to throb as much in your breast as in its own. That is quite true. But bear with me, you who are wives, and who would see your daughters in their turn enter wifehood, crowned with undiminished honour, and enshrined as heretofore in the sacred circle of home affections. It has become your duty, if need be, to tear aside as it were the veil from the sanctuary of married life, that those may see and understand who perhaps only fail in defending because they have not yet succeeded in comprehending the significance and nobility of marriage. Let them learn first how loyal marriage cannot as time passes onwards fail to become a real union. Go among our poorest, our most illiterate, where men and women are rough and childish to the last degree; you will find that, only given honest and kindly hearts, in spite of complete ignorance and total want of reflection, the fact of living together in faithful marriage has wrought this effect: the man and wife have become one. You may see, as I have seen, a

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woman in great poverty, dragged down by a number of children, toiling from early morning till late night to keep her home together, of any degree of ignorance, and any childish lack of self-control which you may choose to imagine, but with an honest face, and eyes lit up with all a woman's love, as she says to you, perhaps in a voice at that very moment weak from want of food, "I don't make no trouble of my work, nor yet of my family; and Charles, I believe he'd lay down his life for me." And you may note, if you can gain their confidence enough for them to consider you as a friend and behave naturally before you, in the habits and ways of many a rough, callous, free-spoken fellow, the place which his "missus" holds in his life, and the value he sets upon her love and trust. This is the testimony of the ignorant and unreflecting, perhaps somewhat akin to the foolishness of God. And now turn, far as from the east to the west, to another class of men, and see how thinking minds of the world regard the phenomenon which marriage places before them. Hamerton, in his "Intellectual Life," treats of marriage only as it concerns and is affected by the intellect, and therefore excludes both its deepest aspects, and its quickest assimilative growths which do not come of the intellect; but he says that real marriage is a long, slow intergrowth, like that of two trees growing

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quite close together in the forest. He speaks also of unhappy marriages, and of their possibly being followed by the "endurable peace of a settled separation." See how noteworthy this phrase is, and how much is revealed by it, that such and so great are the effects of marriage, so contrary to nature as well as to religion is the tearing asunder of that which God hath joined together, that even when the parting has seemed most desirable, the conditions attained will probably be only one of "endurable peace." Sad and cold phrase! who would dream of applying it at the dissolution of any mere civil contract? Read Georges Sand's "Valvédre," and see how through the whole book—the work, remember, of one who herself set at nought the law of marriage—there may be traced, amid its obscure sophisms put forth in language clear as crystal, its distasteful details, its French *goût*, horrible on certain subjects as the trail of a slug over a jewel, an unhesitating recognition of a noble ideal of marriage. The hero of the book is in fact created to uphold his ideal, and worthily he does it; while in the too painful portrait of the cold, beautiful, weak, worthless, false woman for whom the name of wife has no meaning, we are forced to see that which ought to be, by having it cut into our very hearts in the guise of that which is not. Again, in the books of George Eliot, whose lofty mind and fine morality

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bear all the more emphatic testimony for us that they are dissociated from Christian teaching. Study "Middlemarch," and see how, though like Georges Sand she does it by the negative method, she forces on her readers a conception of the power of marriage.

If then the marriage union be as we say it is, and as the finger-posts of all facts point it to be; if it be proved to be, by the fair growth of its life under favourable circumstances, and by the pain and suffering which follow when injury has been done to it, a real union, what follows? Complete community of interest, actual experienced community of interest, not mere ceremonial treatment of that which belongs to the one as belonging to the other. The man's relations become those of the wife; the woman's relations become those of the husband. A man has relations of his own whom he is forbidden to marry; precisely those relations of his wife he is forbidden to marry, for the simple reason that they are his too, for his wife is part of himself, and what is hers is his; and the prohibition is no mere arbitrary enactment of law resting on man's wit, but it is the guidance of natural morality and the teaching of natural science, made easier for man to follow by being emphasized as the command of God. Till it is right for a man to marry his own sister, or till you can undo the relationship of blood so that sister shall cease to

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be sister, so long a man cannot marry the sister of that wife with whom he is become one flesh. These restrictions have until now been recognized by law and respected by the people. They are still upheld by the great majority of the nation, in spite of the dishonest and shifty agitation resorted to by those who wish to sweep them away and thus reduce the status of marriage, and narrow the circle within which passionless love bears rule. But this is a very insufficient simile, for you may lessen a circle and yet it may remain unbroken as before; rather I should say this alteration of the law is like a blow at a crystal vessel, where the breaking out of a fragment ruins the whole. The agitation is dishonest, because facts are not plainly dealt with, not even correctly ascertained, and because the most preposterously exaggerated language is used on the whole subject. If the statements pressed upon us as to the number of honest people suffering wrong under the present marriage law were at all justifiable, should we not every one know many cases in which men either had married or wanted to marry their sisters-in-law? Most of us can run over a pretty long list of families with whom we are acquainted, and of whose habits and modes of thought we have a fair general idea. I beg you all to pause here, and do this in your own mind. And now what percentage do you find of cases where these marriages have

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been either concluded or desired? What proportion do they bear to the total number of marriages you know? Of course there are some such cases,—who doubts it? There are men who kill, and men who steal, and men who blaspheme, and men who swindle, and men who wish to legalize the indulgence of passion which never would have arisen in the breasts of their fellow-men more honourable than themselves. But the extraordinary thing is that we are asked to legislate to please these few men who desire to break the law, though as a rule we do not remodel a law according to the advice of those who have made manifest that they have no regard for it. In this age, too, when questionable measures are carried because the rights of the majority prevail over all other considerations, how strange that we are to consult only the wishes of a small minority, exercised against the strong feelings and convictions of the far larger number. Of course you may occasionally have a case in which it may seem to be really hard that a man may not marry his wife's sister. This is only to say that the marriage law is not by special miracle exempted from the universal rule of the limitation and imperfection of all human affairs, on account of which no law that ever was made, however holy and just and good, can escape the occasional bearing hard in some individual cases. No one thinks, however, of alter-

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ing the law for this reason; but in this special case we are asked to do so, to the detriment of the great body of the people. So contrary is this course to ordinary usage that no one doubts the personal reasons which underlie the attempt to take it. And yet others have joined themselves to the first promoters of the Bill, carried away by the plausible representations made of the sufferings of those who can be relieved only by such a measure. But how degradingly easy is such special pleading, made by men who desire only to obtain their personal wishes, no matter how, and who therefore check their words by no attempts—or by those partial and prejudiced attempts which are worse than none—to bring out the whole truth concerning the matter in dispute. There are surely other men in England with a grievance besides these few particular men who are crying for their wives' sisters. There is for instance a whole class of men, not numerous, doubtless, certainly not numerous—still a professional class, as I understand, though I am obliged to say that I do not speak of my own knowledge. I mean that highly trained and well-skilled body of men, who, with a fond disregard of all the usual careers of life freely open to them, have irretrievably set their fervent affections on one particular method of gaining their daily bread—a method too which we may well call harmless, since if anybody is hurt

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by it it is entirely his own fault, and no one is at all bound to lose his money at cards unless he likes. Yet cheating at cards is illegal. Why should this be? Why so needlessly lacerate the feelings of these men? Why, as the *Spectator* so compassionately says of the poor longing lovers of the sister-in-law, should not their feelings be allowed to seek the sanction of religion? How much more suitable, how much more decent, if the nearest minister of religion, Anglican or otherwise, were compelled by law to attend when required at a gambling *séance*, and say, "For what we are going to receive, the Lord make us truly thankful." But after all it might not answer. One of the wretched Irish murderers in a certain way sought the sanction of religion; but popular feeling did not appear to think any the better of him for that.

There are no doubt in England households which are no homes, where neither husband nor wife deserve to bear the name, where the bond of marriage is but as a cloak flung over the lawlessness beneath. It is from households such as these that the cry comes for this change in the marriage laws; and it is from these, as we all well know, that the cry will come again and again for further and further change. The promoters of the Bill, even though it make against their own cause, cannot affect to deny that it is but the thin end of the wedge. No simile

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is more appropriate than one which comes naturally to a woman's tongue; it is the dropped stitch in the knitting which if not caught up instantly will run down through the whole work and spoil it. At last that lofty and complete ideal of marriage which has hitherto preserved social order and morality will be struck down out of sight—and what will take its place? Is it to households from which the ideal of marriage is passed away that our statesmen look for the breeding up of the men who are to carry on the destiny of our nation and maintain her place in the course of the world's history? Or is it to the mass of orderly law-loving, law-abiding homes, wherein the wife's sister has always been the man's sister, and peace and comfort have reigned in a brotherly and sisterly circle? These two kinds of households have different standards of social morality; why is law to be constructed according to the less excellent standard of the smaller number, instead of upon the higher standard of the larger number? As I said before, those who in other matters break the law are not supposed to be the best judges of the law, nor after they have broken it is a new law made to condone their past fault, and turn it into a right action in the future. Are not the promoters of the Bill ashamed to bring it forward on the grounds on which it now rests—the indulgence by a small body of men of a passion

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acknowledged by the whole of the sober and temperate community to be unlawful in itself as well as prohibited by law?—a passion in which no honourable man would indulge? To a loyal and honourable man the mere knowledge that a woman is his wife's sister prevents the rising of passion towards her; at the very least, it enables him to stifle it at once; as many a man in the pursuit of duty has to stifle some passion, innocent enough in itself, but in which he must not indulge. Nothing is more certain than this—that where a man cannot under any conceivable circumstances marry, there he does not fall in love. It is an indisputable and universally known fact; and it is this very fact—consider it well—which stamps the agitation for the change in the marriage laws with its truly disgraceful character. I do not speak of depraved men, I speak of the mass of honest honourable men, who have some ordinary amount of conscience and some sense of duty; and I say that among the vast majority of such men the wife's sister simply is their sister, never can be anything else. The relationship has always been so fully recognized that again and again you find it naturally assumed from the very beginning of an engagement. A man meets the sisters of his betrothed on a totally different ground from that on which he meets any other girls. And if one sister should sup-

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plant another in his regard, is not that regarded as terrible treachery? Of course, as married life goes on the relationship developes itself more fully, often into true affection, and it will often last, not merely after the death of the wife, but after the remarriage of the man, an event which would naturally more than any other tend to separate him from his first wife's sister. You will have but to glance round among your friends to find instances of these cases; instances, too, of the complete recognition of the fact that a husband's brother is a brother. Of course the two things stand or fall together; there is not the smallest jot of difference between the cases. It would be well if they were always considered together. No one wants a woman to marry her husband's brother; but why? Every argument that has been brought forward for the marriage of the man with the wife's sister applies, as far as I know, with at least equal force to the marriage of the woman with the husband's brother. Yet no one asks for or desires this; and the fact cannot be without significance. Does it not show that the clamour for the first arises only from unlawful desire? Were it sprung from an honest, however misguided, wish to amend the marriage laws, the second class of marriages must, it appears to me, have been also advocated, and the balance held equally as between man and woman.

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Consider, now, that every man and woman in the world stand towards each other in one of two positions. Either under present or possible circumstances they may marry if they choose; or under no circumstances whatever can they become husband and wife. According to these facts the mutual behaviour of man and woman is regulated; and in no conceivable or imaginable way can the tone and manner of necessity assumed in the one case be taken up in the other. Let any pretty young wife note well the behaviour towards herself of her husband's friends. However intimate, however familiar they may be with her when he is present, there comes a subtle change in their manner when he is absent. (Is it necessary to repeat, I speak always of honourable men?) Let her note this well, and compare it with the behaviour and manner of the man who never could under any circumstances marry her—her husband's brother. He may perhaps not be so intimate with her as the friends; that makes no difference. In the one case there is a delicate instinctive caution, fine as gossamer, invisible as air, but still as plainly felt; in the other, a perfect freedom, as complete as that of the intercourse of children. Strange power of an acknowledged fact. In all probability the young wife's husband will live fifty years, and none of his friends will have a chance of marrying her, but there is the effect of

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the possible contingency; and on the other hand, in the case of the brother, here is the effect of the absolute impossibility.

Apply these considerations now to the position of your sister in your husband's house. If she ceases to be your husband's sister, she ceases for practical purposes to be your sister. You may love her as much as ever, but you can never again have the comfort of her in your husband's home, at least when he is in it; so that it comes very much to your having to choose between your husband and your sister. For, of course, when you have young lady visitors, you have to be visible a little and attend to them, and they don't like it (I know nothing of fast young ladies) if you don't join in their amusements and conversations. But when your sister is with you, you can be out of the way as much as you like, or tranquilly ill, secure that breakfast will be comfortable, that the cook will not be allowed too many flights of imagination, that auntie will protect or intimidate as need be those ubiquitous children, and will make pleasant talk for your husband when he wants it. Now, however, none of these things can be; at least if you have the use of your sister, you must have your mother too to look after her—your husband will be the first person to see the necessity of that, and perhaps even her presence will soon be insufficient; who knows? Why should not a man

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wish to marry his mother-in-law as well as his sister-in-law? Who in the whole world could make so good a mother for his poor children? I observed in the newspaper the other day the case of a man eloping with his mother-in-law. He was somewhat in advance of his age, and met with the usual fate of leading spirits; his movement was not taken up. But when a sufficient number of men recognize the charms of their mothers-in-law, shall we not have another outcry like the present one? Will not the wrongs of their honest hearts be proclaimed, and pretexts sought on every hand for a legal removal of their woes?

Of such pretexts in the present case perhaps the one that is made the most of is the hardship the poor man is said to suffer in not being allowed to marry his sister-in-law. Who raised the cry I do not know; but it was not a bad idea, and skilfully manipulated, the poor man with his wrongs has proved a very successful puppet, and done a good deal for the promoters of the Bill. England is a kind-hearted country. There is everywhere a strong feeling in behalf of the poor man; there is also considerable ignorance of the habits, manners, and customs of the poor man. It is easy for our newspaper critics to construct in their leading articles very nice theories of the wants and needs of the poor man. Some of them wax very pathetic in

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describing how we force him into vice because he may not marry the woman who comes to live with him in such familiar intercourse, that if she cannot be his wife, they must live together in sin. No doubt this manner of talking is far more likely to advance the Bill in the minds of many people than would be the plain facts—how a small number of well-to-do men, not content with having all the world of women to choose from, had cast their eyes at home, and resolved that they would have the power of inducing passion where hitherto the calm of affection had reigned, and of taking wives from among those between whom and themselves had never risen thoughts of marrying or giving in marriage. This parade of the poor man's hard case has imposed on many people, and perhaps particularly on ladies whose actual knowledge of the poor is not equal to their kind sympathy and their ready power of following out theoretical propositions. One lady indeed with a straightforward candour, which I commend to the consideration of the newspapers, said to me, "I cannot make up my mind about it; it does seem so hard for the poor people now; but I must confess that I feel this in theory, for in practice I know very little of the poor." I wish now to offer to her, and all who may take up this paper, some suggestions as to the poor man s concern in the proposed law.

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First of all, sisters-in-law—that is, available ones—are not so plentiful among the poor as the supporters of the Bill make them out to be. In my experience among the poor the girls of a family do not stay at home. They are married, or they go out into the world to do for themselves, as the lads do; they are in domestic service, in factories, in shops, or apprenticed to some trade. The one place where they are not is at home. There will be one with the old people perhaps, and then she is wanted there; there may be another, going out charing by the day or working with her needle at home. I do not wish to overstate my case, nor for a moment to say that there are not exceptions to the rule. For instance, in the straw-plat districts, the industry of which is now much curtailed, the girls do stay at home. They hang for ever about the streets, plat in hand, and the life has a more demoralizing tendency even than that of the factory or the field. Nevertheless, the rule is that among the working classes there is not a great supply of sisters-in-law.

Another point is, the very early age at which the daughters of working men often become useful, and capable of keeping the house going. For instance, I remember a case in which the mother died in her tenth confinement, so there were children enough to look after. The eldest girl was only twelve, the two eldest

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of the family being boys. Below her, of course, came six, without counting the baby; you can calculate their ages. The baby was put out to nurse with a kind woman, who did her duty by it, and would have done so without the payment which the father regularly made to her; but there was no thought at all of taking any woman into the bereaved house. The father was not a remarkable man; he was just a strong, sober, steady workman, a collier, rough enough, but honest, fond of his children, and bringing his money home. I believe he paid a trifle to a neighbour to come in and do the weekly washing for them; that was beyond his little girl's unaided power; for the rest, he boasted with pride how well she could do for him and the two big lads and the younger ones, who of course nearly all went to school. Friends gave a little help, kept an eye on the children's clothes, and put in some stitches to keep them together; and the family got along well. Certainly, in the time of their trouble they seemed to need no sister-in-law at all. I do not think that this case was in any way exceptional, though perhaps it would not be extremely common; but I believe myself it is one of quite sufficiently often occurrence to diminish appreciably the number of sister-in-law cases.

Another consideration is the frequency with which, on the death of the mother, the children,

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if there are only little children, are sent to the house of the grandparents or of a married aunt. It is often found to be the most convenient and least expensive arrangement. The house is often near the father's, "just down street." The father pays a little for them—a smaller sum than that which he considers it would cost him to maintain a woman in his own house; and when he has a sister-in-law, she will not or cannot always pay him for her board if she comes to live with him; and he, perhaps, if he can get rid of his house, boards himself out, as he would if he were single; or he may stay in the house, and a neighbour may come in and "do for" him. In studying the domestic arrangements of the poor, you will be struck at finding how much is made possible for them, and how much is covered by the incessant neighbourly help that is given. They live in a publicity of which we have no idea, all their circumstances known to each other; and if on the one hand this exposes them to trials which we do not know, it certainly on the other hand often brings them assistance for which we should vainly look.

The last point I wish to bring forward is the short time after his wife's death in which a poor man remarries. His code of etiquette does not demand even a year's waiting, and with his needs, and under his circumstances, it is a very wise code too. If he marries again in six

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months, as I have known him do, he wounds no one's feelings; at least, not those of his sympathizing neighbours. They know very well it is the best thing he can do. If only they feel assured that "she'll be kind to my poor gal's little ones," the mother and sisters of his first wife are well content. And here, I may add, that in the only instance which has come to my personal knowledge of a poor man's marrying his sister-in-law, her nieces complained bitterly of her unkindness as a step-mother. "Though she's our own aunt," they said, "though she's our mother's own sister, she uses us shamefully."

No; the poor man needs no alteration in the marriage laws, and has asked for none; the rich man does not need it, but he has asked for it; nay, he has not asked for it, he has clamoured for it; he has not clamoured for it fairly, but he has dishonestly veiled his own dishonourable inclinations under the pretence of benefit to his poorer fellow-men. There is no real hardship whatever in the law as it now stands; but there will be very real hardship indeed in the law as it is proposed it shall stand; and that hardship will fall, not upon the poor, who as I have shown you have aids specially their own for getting through the time of trouble when the wife and mother dies, nor upon the wealthy, who can at all times form two or more establishments under one roof if they like, and in proportion to

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their exalted station find in that very circumstance, and in the state and ceremony which surround them, a sort of dispensation from the obligations of that etiquette which binds men and women who might marry (in passing, let me say, can this have anything to do with what seems to be an undoubted fact, that it is precisely among this very class that the desire has arisen for marriage with a wife's sister? If so, then indeed the things that should have been for their wealth have been unto them an occasion of falling); but the hardship will fall upon the enormous mass of professional men, with modest households and small incomes, and upon all others of the same social standing; that is, take notice, upon the very homes and households from which are wont to spring—only glance through any list of distinguished men—the genius, the power, the thought, the capacity of England; in a word, the flower of the English nation. It is among these very people that sisters-in-law are apt to be most numerous; for, as we all know, and many of us know only too well, the standard of living is now so high that there are great discouragements to marriage, and therefore many girls remain at home who formerly would have been beginning married life as unpretendingly as cheerfully. It is among these very people that the position of the wife's sister, as also the husband's sister, has been most fully

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recognized, for it is among them that the loyal, law-honouring, law-abiding traditions of England have been most faithfully handed down in their completeness; it is among these very people that the sister-in-law is most useful and most needed, both during the wife's life and after her death; for they have not money to obtain the costly, if excellent, help or substitute for the wife which the rich man can so acquire, and yet as to culture and refinement, their requirements are as high as his own. And it is from these very people that the sister-in-law —the sister—is to be taken away. If she be a possible wife, she can be no sister; every man knows that; and the man who said she could the other day must have known that he was speaking folly, and worse than folly. And if she be no sister to the husband, she cannot for purposes of help and comfort in the household be sister to the wife; every wife knows that. And if she cannot so be sister to her own sister, and in her sister's house, misery and disunion have already entered and must abide. For what woman but must resent being torn from the sister given her by God no less than her husband was so given? A life-long struggle must ensue between two absolutely incompatible relationships, and at what cost of suffering who can tell?

Therefore, in the name of honour and virtue,

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of purity, of peace, and of the sacred marriage union between man and woman, and of Him who made that union, I implore you, wives of England, I implore and entreat you to consider well all that is involved in this proposal to legalize marriage with a wife's sister, till your hearts be filled with abhorrence of it and of all the consequences that it must drag in its train. On these there is no need to dwell; for if you look well where this first step is planted, you will see plainly enough whither the track tends. Great is the power of a loyal, faithful, and quiet woman; great the power of a heartfelt, living, absolute conviction—let but every wife in England feel this in her heart, she will need to do little in expressing it, so forcibly can the thoughts of the mind and the desire of the soul impress themselves with but few words, and who can tell but that, like the silent yet irresistible rising of the tide, the influence of woman may not prevail to overwhelm the attack of the scoffers, and preserve the integrity of that marriage union, which both by its fair growth and development in happiness, and by its agony and bleeding wounds when torn and dismembered, proves itself to be veritably and indeed a union—one made out of two.

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